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SOPHISTS AND SOPHISTRY IN PLATO

BY

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A THESIS

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Chapter I.

A Justification of the Prosopographic Approach to the Platonic Dialogues.

The purpose of this thesis has been partially expressed by a scholar of another century in these words, "veterum monumentis populorum meditandis, ad antiquitatis, ut ita dicam, indolem penetrare."¹ More explicitly, it intends revealing the mind of Plato in regard to four Sophists, Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, and Hippias; his descriptive criticism of their philosophy, and his criticism of Sophistry as a quasi-philosophy. Though the Sophists are frequently studied as philosophers, this study will inquire into their philosophy only in so far as it is embodied in the man. It is important to note, as a special characteristic of this thesis, that its source of information will be the dialogues of Plato; any data concerning these men which may have been derived from other sources or authors will resolutely be put aside.

Two definite and outstanding gains should be made by such a study. In the first place, the Sophists, as men who have walked a vivid path in history, are interesting and even mysterious people. Men disagree as to what we should call them,² teachers, journalists, mountebanks, apostles of liberal education. Surely it will be interesting to see them, "non quales nobis, posteris suis, videri voluerunt, sed quales acerrimo aequalium existimatori visi sunt, veluti in scenam Platoniam prodeuntes."³ Secondly, to those who are interested

in the world of Plato, this study will have the special advantage of enlarging their view of the Platonic world and its problems. Just as we should like to visit the places where Plato and his companions held forth in disputation, roam the hallowed grounds of the academy, and drink in the environment that fed the mind of Plato, so we should like to be able to read the dialogues of Plato, co-thinkers with Plato, in so far as this is possible. This study should enable us to come a little closer to Plato's mind, for we will be able to think of some of his friends and enemies as he thought of them.

The question naturally arises, in how far does Plato paint accurate character portraits, and how close can we come to Plato's mind? The answers to both of these questions are disputed. Grote, Sidgwick, Zeller, Burnett, and Shorey disagree among themselves.⁴ As Shorey points out, a look at Diels's Fragmenten der Vorsokratiker shows that most of our knowledge of the Sophists is derived from Plato's dramatic pictures of their conversations with Socrates. Since Plato's word-pictures of the Sophists are heavily colored with satire, it is difficult to tell when we are seeing the true characters of the Sophists in question, and when we are reading Plato's honest estimate of their character. This much, however, seems clear; it seems much more natural, and much more in harmony with Plato's truthful character, to argue that he painted his characters as he really saw them. In other words, even if we

are getting only Plato's view of these men, and, consequently, possibly a prejudiced view, at least we do see them as Plato saw them. Further, we should bear in mind that the point of this thesis is not purely objective, that is, it does not attempt precisely to determine the subjects' characters as they actually were, but rather their characters as they were imaged in the mind of Plato. In line of importance, then, it seeks primarily to learn more about Plato, secondarily to learn more about the Sophists.

The method of inquiry is very simple. First the Sophists are introduced; we are told who they were and how their type happened on the fifth-century Greek scene. Then we are given Plato's vignettes of Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, and Hippias. Finally, the thesis is summarized with a review of Plato's criticism of Sophistry as a quasi-philosophy.

Notes to Chapter I.

1. Van Prinsterer, Platonica Prosopographia, p.2.
2. Zeller, Outlines of Greek Philosophy, p. 91; Jackson, Encyclopedia Britannica, art. "Sophists", p. 420; Gomperz, Greek Thinkers, ch. on Sophists; Leclère, La Philosophie Gracque Avant Socrate, p. 111; Shorey, What Plato Said, pp. 14-15.
3. Van prinsterer, loc. cit.
4. There are pointed bibliographical comments on Sophistic literature in Henry Jackson's excellent article in the Brittanica on the Sophists; in Shorey, loc. cit.; and in Leclere, op. cit., pp. 125-126.

Chapter II.

A Resume' of the Rise of the Sophists.

From the beginning of the fifth century, there began to prevail among the Greeks certain views the dissemination of which after some decades wrought an important change in the manner of thought of the cultured circles and in the tendency of scientific life. These views were the legitimate offspring of a crisis in philosophy. The materialism of the Atomists, the idealism of the Eleatics, and the doctrine of universal change, which was a tenet of the School of Heraclitus--all these tendencies resulted in a condition of unrest, out of which philosophy could not advance to a more satisfactory state until an enquiry was made into the problem of the value of knowledge. This restlessness of spirit, however, must also be attributed to the general development of Greek national life. The greater and more rapid was the progress of universal culture since the Persian War in the whole of Hellas, and above all in Athens, which was now the center of its intellectual and political life, the more did the necessity of a special preparation for political activity assert itself in regard to those who desired to distinguish themselves; the more completely victorious democracy gradually set aside all the limits which custom and law had hitherto placed to the will of the sovereign people, and the more brilliant the prospects thus opened to anyone who could win over the people to himself, the more

valuable and indispensable must have appeared the instruction, by means of which a man could become an orator and popular leader. This peculiar state of the national life and the chaotic state of philosophy gave rise to a new class of men, the Sophists.¹

The Sophists did not propose a solution to the question of the aptitude of the mind for truth and the criterion of truth and certitude. They did focus attention on the problem. The Sophists may be called the first sceptics² and it is because we have sceptics that we have evolved a system of epistemology. This might be considered a negative approach to an understanding of the Sophists. Positively, it was the Sophists who announced themselves ready to train men for eminence in private and civil life.³ Various Sophists used various means to achieve this end. Some, like Protagoras, used grammar, style, poetry and oratory. This training resembled a higher education supplementing the ordinary training in music and gymnastics with which the older Greeks had contented themselves. Other Sophists like Hippias of Elis, widened the range of instruction, including scientific and technical subjects, but handling them, and teaching their pupils to handle them in a popular way. Gorgias of Leontini brought the Sophists a new tool from Sicily, where the technical study of rhetoric-- especially forensic rhetoric-- had reached a degree of perfection. The teaching of the Sophists had positive merit; it recognized

and to some extent undertook to supply the demands of a liberal literary education. It is also reasonable to assume that the program of the Sophists as extended by men like Hippias, had not a little to do with the development of that versatility which was so notable an element of the Greek character.

Counterbalancing these merits, the teaching of the Sophists had one outstanding, regrettable defect, its indifference to truth.⁴ We will not say that the Sophists were the foes of truth, though some of them did not hesitate at times to sacrifice the truth to their own ends, but the dialogues of Plato make it quite clear that the Sophists were guilty of shameful indifference to the truth.

It will be sufficient for our purposes if we note two facts. First, the Sophists, though they did not constitute a school of philosophers, were philosophers of a sort, and were philosophers of the same school in so far as they all had a sceptical attitude, refusing to give credence to any philosophical system of their predecessors, and sceptical of proposing any system themselves. Second, they were educators, supplementing the ordinary Greek education with a higher education in a grand diversity of subjects. Plato would naturally be interested in these men who were quasi-philosophers and real educators. We proceed now to a fuller description of the Sophists, together with a criticism of their philosophical tenets and their pedagogy, as we read of them in the dialogues of Plato.

Notes to Chapter II.

1. Cf. Jackson, Encyclopedia Britannica, art. "Sophists"; Shorey, What Plato Said, pp. 14-15; Zeller, Outlines of Greek Philosophy, p. 91.
2. Cf. Turner, History of Philosophy, ch. on Sophists.
3. Vf. Protagoras, 318.D-319.A.
4. Cf. Protagoras, 331.C, 336.C; Theaetetus, 152.A; Gorgias, 459.C; Phaedrus, 267.A; Greater Hippias, 288.A, 298.B.

Chapter III.

Protagoras

Of the four Sophists to be treated in this thesis, the first on the scene is Protagoras, "qui Sophistarum duxit agmen".¹ According to Plato's Athenian standards Protagoras was a foreigner, a citizen of Abdera. Among the Greek people in general, whether in Athens or abroad, he was held the wisest of their generation.² In fact this reputation for wisdom and his ability to teach it to others so captivated the Greek mind, that the thrilled Hippocrates did not hesitate to rouse Socrates from sleep at early dawn to announce the exciting news of Protagoras' advent to the city.³ In the narration of this incident Plato gives us a vivid picture of the grip that the sophisms of Protagoras had on the Greek mind, and the consequent reputation for wisdom and cleverness that he enjoyed among the generality of the Greeks. Plato, however, did not subscribe to this popular opinion. Though he does not say so in so many words, still the brilliant Platonic satire reveals his real mind. It is quite clear that Plato is giving us Protagoras' reputation for wisdom as it actually flourished among the Greeks, not as Plato himself would have it.

The esteem Protagoras enjoyed among the Greeks as a general run was but an echo of the reverence he received from his own disciples. These men, who were from various cities and had left whatever calling they had in order to follow him,

hung on Protagoras' lips and dogged his footsteps. "He enchants them with his voice like Opheus, while they follow where the voice sounds, enchanted."⁴ In an admirable little passage in the Protagoras, Plato describes these spellbound disciples when he pictures a scene in which Protagoras is strolling along while he discourses, with his pupils trailing after him, eager to be as close to him as possible, yet cautious lest they come too close and collide with him should he make a sudden stop. "As for me," narrates Socrates, "I was delighted with the admirable care they took not to hinder Protagoras at any moment by getting in front; but whenever the master turned about and those with him, it was fine to see the orderly manner in which his train of listeners split up into two parties on this side and on that, and reeling round formed up again each time in his rear most admirably."⁵ It seems that here Plato shows a mild rancor over an adulation shown to Protagoras, and an adulation of more modest proportions than that shown later to Plato himself by the humanists of the Italian Renaissance.

Protagoras was not a retiring genius. He had no mean estimation of his own gifts and was confident of his ability to teach others virtue.⁶ He liked to make a display before people, reveled in their applause, and gave himself airs on the personal attachment shown by his followers.⁷ All of which leads us to picture Plato's Protagoras as a man who had

achieved a reputation far beyond his deserts, and one who was vain of his false repute.

Plato gives some reasons to account for Protagoras' fame. He tells us that Protagoras was a very clever speaker.⁸ Even Socrates seems to admit Protagoras' mastery of speech. In fact, though Protagoras is made to pause at times by Socrates' questionings, he proves himself an adroit disputant, seldom at a loss for words, and at times startlingly clever.⁹ So that there appears to have been some reason why Protagoras yielded to no man in ability to argue, or in understanding the interchange of reason.¹⁰ Plato merely hints at the breadth of Protagoras's knowledge when he instances his knowledge of the poets, a knowledge which Protagoras considered of the greatest importance.¹¹

In general, however, Protagoras owed his fame to the fact that he was a Sophist.¹² Plato complains that it is difficult to say just what a Sophist is.¹³ He pictures him as "a sort of merchant or dealer in provisions on which the soul is nourished, hawking them about to any odd purchaser who may desire them."¹⁴ Though Protagoras knew that there were many who blushed to admit that they were Sophists and tried to conceal the fact by various subterfuges,¹⁵ he himself enlarges complacently on his own frank practice of openly avowing his possibly invidious profession, even being the first to charge a fee for his services.¹⁶ Protagoras seemed to convey to his

followers the exalted view he himself had of Sophistry. He made it out an ancient art, and many famous men he claimed were Sophists, e.g., Homer, Hesiod, and Simonides.¹⁷ Some of his followers came to him with the intention of becoming professional Sophists, others came for a more generic education; they wanted to become clever speakers, quick rather than deep.¹⁸ Protagoras claimed that he could teach them what they wanted. He said that he improved both the old and the young through association with himself. He thought that among all the Sophists he alone had the correct method--he did not teach his followers arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, and music, but "good judgment in their own affairs, showing a man how best to order his own home; and in the affairs of the city showing how he may have most influence on public affairs, both in speech and in action."¹⁹ In a word, he taught them to be good citizens.

Plato did not concede to Protagoras all of the virtues with which he considered himself possessed. He admitted he was clever in speaking, well versed in the subtleties of argumentation. He denied Protagoras' ability to teach men to be good citizens,²⁰ since in general he did not admit that virtue was teachable. Even as regards his cleverness at speech and argumentation Plato had a blighting word to say. He said that compared to Prodicus, at least, Protagoras was not expert at distinguishing words.²¹ In particular, he did not seem to distinguish between a discussion and a harangue.²² In fact

Protagoras' prolixity in argumentation was quite a trial to Plato. "He spins out a lecture on each question--beating off the arguments, refusing to give a reason, and so dilating until most of the hearers have forgotten the point at issue."²³ Protagoras' long-winded answers, evasive replies, and childish vanity jarred the smooth, polished, philosophic mind of Plato. Yet, since he knew that Protagoras was resentful if his ignorance was manifested, Plato had to feed his vanity if the discussion was to be continued.²⁴ He realized that Protagoras was too vain to care much for the ideas of others; a defect he manifested when he patronizingly approved Socrates' zeal in argumentation, declaring that he himself was neither ill-natured nor envious.²⁵

Finally, Protagoras showed a certain levity of mind in the way in which he boasted that he did not even bother to consider whether the gods existed or not, excluding them from all discussion, oral or written.²⁶ There was not much room for the gods in Protagoras's scheme of life, for man was for him the measure of all things.²⁷ This was a less blatant way of saying that for Protagoras, Protagoras was the measure of all things. The existence of the gods would only complicate the case.

The Protagoras which Plato portrays for us, then, is on the other hand a thoroughly talented man, versed in many branches of learning, clever at discourse and argumentation, and with a certain charm of manner. On the other hand Protagoras

had the defects of a Sophist, a levity and trickery of the mind and a lack of prolonged serious purpose, combined with a scarcely pardonable vanity. This is the Protagoras which the fifth-century mind of Plato reveals to us.

Notes to Chapter III.

1. Platonica Prosopographia, p. 79.
2. Protagoras, 309.D; Theaetetus, 160.D; Meno, 91.E.
3. Protagoras, 309.E.
4. Protagoras, 315.A.
5. Protagoras, 314.E - 315.A; cf. Republic, 600.B.
6. Protagoras, 316.D.
7. Cf., Protagoras, 317.C, 320.C, 328.B; Theaetetus, 179.A.
8. Protagoras, 310.E, 320.D, 328.D; Phaedrus, 267.C.
9. Protagoras, 350.C, 339.E.
10. Protagoras, 336.C.
11. Protagoras, 339.A, 352.D.
12. Protagoras, 311.E.
13. Protagoras, 312.D.
14. Protagoras, 313.C, D.
15. Protagoras, 312.A.
16. Protagoras, 316.B, 328.B.
17. Protagoras, 316.C, D, E.
18. Protagoras, 315.A, 312.B, D.
19. Protagoras, 318.D - 319.A.
20. Protagoras, 310.D, 319.B.
21. Protagoras, 341.A.
22. Protagoras, 336.A.
23. Protagoras, 336.C.
24. Protagoras, 329.C.

- 25. Protagoras, 361.E.
- 26. Theaetetus, 162. E.
- 27. Theaetetus, 152. A, et passim.

Chapter IV.

Gorgias

Our dramatist gives Gorgias of Leontini a much more gracious entrance than that accorded to Protagoras. As professor Shorey points out, "The discussion with Gorgias is conducted in terms of strict courtesy. Instead of the controversy in the Protagoras, a studiously polite and cautious appeal from Socrates induces Gorgias to substitute the method of brief question and answer, in which he also claims to excel, for the long speeches to which he is more accustomed."¹ Gorgias appears to have been amiable and friendly, and in pleasant contrast to the quick-tempered Polus he is wise and gentlemanly. He shows consideration for his listeners, lest the conversation prove tedious to them, and for his fellow disputants he plays the part of the mild-mannered peacemaker, pouring the oil of tact on the turbulent waters of the discussion.²

Generally when Plato speaks of Gorgias he refers to his renown as a rhetorician. This is Gorgias' title to fame, and of this title he enjoys a master's pride. He boasts that he is not only a rhetorician, but a good rhetorician as such he should be addressed. Plato has Prodicus, no mean rhetorician himself, tell us, "I have often heard Gorgias constantly maintain that the art of persuasion surpasses all others; for this, he said, makes all things subject to itself, not by force, but

by their free will, and it is by far the best of the arts."³ This was too much for Plato, so that he had Socrates parody Gorgias' sublime notions about rhetoric.⁴ Evidently Gorgias' eye was single, and his singleness of purpose meant being a good rhetorician, with the profits consequent upon this achievement. As a result, nearly everything Plato has to tell us is something in reference to Gorgias, the rhetorician par excellence.

Gorgias could regale a crowd with such a feast of words that they would sit for hours listening to his lengthy discourses, heavy with Gorgian features and affectations. After such a treat the speaker dared to run a question-box, letting his hearers heckle him with questions on any subject. Such an invitation would undoubtedly bring forth numerous difficult questions from the artful Greeks. Nevertheless, Gorgias maintained that no one had asked him anything new for many years. This is really no slur on the ingenuity of the Greeks, because Gorgias was not noted for any scrupulousness in sticking to the point. Rather, his discourse was generally lengthy and intricate enough to lose his interragator in a labyrinth of words, so that his rhetoric served him as a cloak with which to hide his ignorance of the other arts.⁵

His genius for rhetoric gained for Gorgias both a name and a livelihood.⁶ "Gorgias, the Sophist from Leontini," recounts Socrates, "came here from home in the public capacity of envoy, as being best able of all the citizens of Leontini

to attend to the interests of the community, and it was the general opinion that he spoke excellently in the public assembly, and in his private capacity; by giving exhibitions and associating with the young, he earned and received a great deal of money from this city."⁷ Plato tells us that even he gave the Thessalians, who of old were famous and admired among the Greeks for their riding and their riches, a name for wisdom. "For this you have to thank Gorgias," he explains, "for when he came to that city he made the leading men of the Aleudae and the Thessalians generally enamoured of wisdom. Nay more, he has given you the regular habit of answering any chance question in a fearless, magnificent manner, as befits those who know; for he sets the example of offering himself to be questioned by any Greek who chooses, and on any point one likes, and he has an answer for everybody."⁸ He was able, besides, to elicit from the cautious Socrates himself the enviable name of Nestor.⁹ This is praise from one who was not at one with Gorgias' views. Even so, Socrates gives credit where credit is due, and if he has any fault to find with Gorgias, it is not because Gorgias is deficient in his chosen field; on the contrary, he had attained a disastrous proficiency.

Plato has Socrates tell us various things about Gorgias which he did not like or with which he disagreed.¹⁰ In general Plato was a foe of the Sophists, and he frequently puts Gorgias among their number. Plato knew that Gorgias insisted that

he should not be called a Sophist but rather a rhetorician. Plato dismisses the distinction, "Sophist and orator," he says, "are the same thing, or very much of a piece."¹¹

Further, Plato denied that Gorgias could make any one a rhetorician. Even if he should succeed Plato would consider the pupil to have acquired a very unenviable talent. He says that the rhetorician uses his art to mask his ignorance. Just as a lazy man might use fancy garments to give shape and comeliness to his body, instead of training it by gymnastics, so the rhetorician cloaks his ignorance with alluring figures of speech, paying no heed to reality, but only to appearances. In this vein he says, "Gorgias saw that probabilities are more to be esteemed than truths; he makes small things seem great and great things small by the power of his words, and new things old and old things the reverse, and he invented conciseness of speech and measureless length on all subjects."¹² Besides, though he admits that Gorgias has a more pleasant method of training those about him, gorging them with abundance of nice things of every sort, still he is confident that only by his own difficult method of a strict discipline of the mind will the young men of Athens be made good citizens. Thus while the flattery of Gorgias, for so Plato denominates his rhetoric, will bring the applause of the crowd, the bitter draughts of Socrates' logic will be swallowed with distaste; still, only the sterner regimen will fashion good

citizens, imbued with the truth and wary of appearances.

Gorgias does not suffer the strictures of Socrates without a word in his own defense.¹³ He will not admit that he is a Sophist unless a distinction is drawn. He is not of the number of those who trap their fellows with the snares of an insidious logic. Nor does he heedlessly promise to teach others virtue. We read in the *Meno*: Socrates, "Well, and what of the Sophists? Do you consider these, wisdoms only professors, to be teachers of virtue?" Meno replies, "That is the point, Socrates, for which I admire Gorgias; you will never hear him promising this, and he ridicules others when he hears them promise it. Skill in speaking is what he takes it to be their business to produce."¹⁴ Gorgias purposes to teach men to persuade with speeches. Since he maintains that "virtue is the power of governing mankind,"¹⁵ he will teach virtue incidentally because it will be the rhetorician who will have the power of swaying the minds of his fellow men. Gorgias himself deprecates the evil use of rhetoric, but says logically enough that we should blame the individual person not the art.¹⁶ His own defense is weak, it bogs down at a very important point, for he does not show how in his own speech his art is but a medium not a substitute for his thought. This is a weakness which Socrates made pungently clear, for in the *Gorgias*, our friend is abashed when tricked into a contradiction by Socrates' rhetoric.¹⁷

When we review Plato's portrait of Gorgias we find that he considered him a polite, considerate gentleman, ever mindful of the convenience of his listeners and the personal feelings of his opponents in debate. His skill in polished if flowery speech is unmatched by the Greeks of his time. In paying tribute to the splendor of Gorgias' speech he does not intend to say that it was remarkable for content. Rather he censures Gorgias for the shallowness of his art--pointing out at the same time the answer to such censure, "blame the artist not the art". He places Gorgias in the damning category of Sophist, and will not listen to Gorgias' contention that a distinction must be drawn between the Sophist and orator. Plato, evidently, was firmly convinced that the skill which Gorgias had to teach would only prove an instrument of undoing in the hands of the Athenian youth. In general, Plato's Gorgias proves to be the Gorgias of history.

Notes to the Chapter on Gorgias.

1. Shorey, What Plato Said, p. 134.
2. Cf. Gorgias, 447.B, C, 461.C, 506.B.
3. Philebus, 58.A.
4. Cf. Gorgias, 449.A, C, 448.D, 449.C, 456,A & B.
5. Cf. Gorgias, 447,A. C, 448,A. 457.E, 458.B, C, 466.B, 459.C; Symposium, 198.C.
6. Apology, 19.E; Theages, 128.A.
7. Greater Hippias, 282.B
8. Meno, 70.B
9. Phaedrus, 261.C.
10. Cf. Gorgias, 458.E, 463.A, B, 513.A, 521.D, E, 522.A; Meno, 73.C, 76.C.
11. Gorgias, 520.A.
12. Phaedrus, 267.A.
13. Cf. Gorgias, 520.A, 452.E, 457.A, B, C, 494.D.
14. Meno, 95.C.
15. Meno, 73.C.
16. Gorgias, 457.A, B, C.
17. Gorgias, 494.D.

Chapter V.

Prodicus

In an exposition of Plato's portrait of Prodicus of Ceos one could easily be guilty of over-simplification. It is true that by far the greater number of references to Prodicus in the dialogues have to do with Prodicus the genius for synonyms. Nevertheless, it is possible in a number of instances in the dialogues to glimpse Prodicus the man. Witness this bit wherein Socrates discovers in the Protagoras that Prodicus is among those present. "Nay more, Tantalus also did I there behold, for you know Prodicus of Ceos is in Athens too: he was in a certain apartment formerly used by Hipponicus as a strong-room, but now cleared out by Callias to make more space for his numerous visitors, and turned into a guest-chamber. Well, Prodicus was still abed, wrapped up in sundry fleeces and rugs, and plenty of them too, it seemed."¹ A scholar of the early nineteenth century, commenting on this passage, has this observation to make: "Plato cert de ipsius moribus non honorifice sensit.... mollem eum et voluptarium fuisse, idem, neque admodum obscure, indicavit. Porro non sine causa . . . suspicatur appellatione Tantalii hominis tangi avaritiam."² Appealing to another passage he defends this last statement: "Nam avarus profecto fuit, cuius interiores doctrinae recessus nonnisi grandi soluta pecunia patebant; quamvis, ne scilicet ullam quaestus faciendi rationem omitteret, mediocrem mediocris institutionis

mercedem statuebat."³ He refers to the following passage in the Cratylus: "Now if I had attended Prodicus' fifty-drachma o course of lectures, after which, as he himself says, a man has a complete education on this subject, there would be nothing to hinder your learning the truth about the corrections of names at once; but I have heard only the one-drachma course, and so I do not know what the truth is about such matters."⁴ Whether or not we agree entirely with the interpretation of Plato which we have given above, it does seem Plato means us to know that Prodicus was not of the "daily dozen school". Whether because of ill health or because of a very human degree of laziness, Prodicus was one to enjoy a certain physical snugness. And while we are speaking of the very human side of Prodicus, we might mention that as Plato describes him he was not altogether devoid of a sense of humor, or least he had a gentlemen's knack for smoothing over a rough situation, for more than once Plato mentions Prodicus laughing.⁵

We do have to be cautious in saying that Plato would have us believe that Prodicus was guilty of avarice. The reference to Tantalus may well have been a mock serious and mock epic manner of introducing a Sophist who enjoyed a reputation beyond his deserts. Still it is quite true that Plato was annoyed that Prodicus should demand a fee for his instructions and he indicates that Prodicus made no mean profit. He tells us: "He received a marvelous sum of money . . . earning more money from his wisdom than any artisan from his art."⁶

Plato was piqued at seeing the young men pay a grateful fee to Prodicus when they could learn from others free of charge.

"He is so wise that he goes to our cities and persuades the noblest and wealthiest of our young men -- who have the choice of learning from any citizen they choose, free of charge -- he persuades them to abandon that instruction and learn from him, with a deposit, besides, of a large sum of money as his fee, and to feel thankful in addition."⁷ According to Plato's mind, Prodicus' pupils were paying for something that would do them more harm than good.

Plato gives us reason to believe that he did not altogether disapprove of Prodicus' teaching, because in a number of places Socrates is also called the pupil of Prodicus.⁸ It is reasonable to suppose that he would admit Prodicus' dictum, "First of all you have to learn about the correct use of words."⁹ This would be a logical point of departure in any system of pedagogy. In the Theaetetus Socrates, the midwife of thought, tells his listener that he did not hesitate to send some pupils to Prodicus -- pupils who did not seem to respond to the Socratic method. "But in some cases, Theaetetus, when I see that they have no need of me, I act with perfect good-will as a match-maker, and, under God, I guess very successfully with whom they can associate profitably, and I have handed over many of them to Prodicus, and many to other wise men."¹⁰ We cannot imagine Socrates sending any one to a teacher whose methods he

repudiated.

It may be a doubtful compliment, but this much may be said of Prodicus and his methods, he was a popular success. In a private way we note this in the Protagoras where we see that Prodicus had a circle of his own within the larger group of Protagoras' followers.¹¹ Plato makes mention of a more public following of Prodicus in a passage in the Greater Hippias.

"Prodicus," he narrates, "often went to other places in a public capacity, and the last time, just lately when he came here in a public capacity from Ceos; he gained great reputation by his speaking before the Council, and in his private capacity, by giving exhibitions and associating with the young, he received a great sum of money."¹² When we associate with this a passage from the Republic, we ascertain Plato's mind in regard to Prodicus' success. He tells us: ". . . Prodicus of Ceos, and a host of other persons, can, as we see, persuade the men of their day by private intercourse, that they will be incapable of managing their own houses and city, unless they superintend their education; and so . . . the wisdom implied in this assures to these teachers an affection so unbounded, that they are almost carried about on the shoulders of their companions."¹³

Evidently Plato is making mention of a popular triumph of which he is utterly unenvious, yet it remains in some sense a triumph.

Prodicus was not timid about proclaiming his contributions to Greek rhetoric. In a discussion concerning the advances made

by various rhetoricians, "Prodicus, when he heard of their inventions, laughed and said that he alone had discovered the art of proper speech, that discourses should be neither long nor short, but of reasonable length."¹⁴ When we consider the success Prodicus had in winning over a crowd we must acknowledge that he had some gift for clever speech. From what Plato tells us, however, it seems that Prodicus' reputation rested on his ability to distinguish synonyms. Occasionally Plato seems to be serious in his admiration for Prodicus' gift, as for instance, when he appeals to Prodicus' label for those who trained orators for the law courts, "whom Prodicus described as on the borderline between philosopher and politician."¹⁵ As a rule Plato's praise of Prodicus' genius is tinged with irony. In illustration of this we may quote a very gem of a passage from the Protagoras. Professor Shorey seems to have preserved its savor in the following version: "The auditors of such a debate ought to be impartial but not neutral in their sentiments. They should listen to both impartially but take the part of the wisers, not the worse. And I implore you, Socrates and Protagoras, to make mutual concessions and to contravene but not to controvert. For contravention is the argument of friends, but controversy is the disputation of opponents. Thus will you, the speakers, receive approbation but not acclamation from us, since approbation is the critical judgment of the mind, while acclamation may be the hypocritical flattery of the tongue. And we, your hearers, will

enjoy gratification, not delectation, for gratification is the mind's delight in learning and delectation is the body's pleasure in eating."¹⁶ If, we suppose, Plato's parody smacks of the real Prodicus, it is easy to understand why, "Prodicus is supposed to be the cleverest of the Sophists at distinguishing terms."

In summary, Plato's delineation of the Sophist Prodicus reveals to us a very human character, who enjoyed at least his share of the amenities of this life; a teacher who considered himself eminently worthy of his hire. Prodicus was a man whose capabilities as a rhetorician were unquestioned by the profanum volgus, and whose subtle distinction of synonyms was the envy of his fellow subjects and Sophists. The great Socrates called himself his pupil. His fellow townsmen sent him as an ambassador to match wits with the wily Athenians. His achievements in his various capacities made him a popular hero. Plato considered him a thwarted genius, since, according to his mind, Prodicus shrouded truth in a maze of distinctions.

1. Protagoras, 315.C
2. Platonica Prosopographia, Van Prinsterer, p. 89.
3. Ibid.
4. Cratylus, 384.B
5. Cf. Protagoras, 358.B; Phaedrus, 267.B.
6. Greater Hippias, 286.C, D.
7. Theages, 128.A; cf. Apology, 19.E.
8. Cf. Cratylus, 384.B; Protagoras, 341.A; Charmides, 163.D.
9. Euthydemus, 305.C.
10. Theaetetus, 151.B.
11. Protagoras, 317.E.
12. Greater Hippias, 282, C , D.
13. Republic, 600. C.
14. Phaedrus, 267. B.
15. Euthydemus, 305. C.
16. Protagoras, 337.A; What Plato Said, p. 127.

Chapter VI.

Hippias

The bitterest barbs of Plato's satire are reversed for Hippias of Elis. The very authenticity of the Hippias dialogues has been questioned, since it has been maintained that Plato could never have written so satirical a dialogue as either the Lesser or the Greater Hippias; and certainly not about a man of such universality of learning and vocation.¹ Be that as it may, the Hippias whom Plato engages in the Protagoras is built on the same lines, if not in such definite proportions, as the Hippias of the dialogues of that name. The few references we find to him in other dialogues are in harmony with the Hippias we see in the Hippias dialogues; certainly they do not paint a picture of a contradictory nature. Besides, the Hippias dialogues are not a mere diatribe directed against Hippias; if they were, we should be surprised to find Plato mentioning so many things for which Hippias has won the admiration and stimulated the imitation of the moderns.

In some respects Hippias was a typical Sophist. He professed to be able to cure the ignorance of those whom he taught, and held that through association with himself men were made better in virtue. It is characteristic of Hippias that he should say that he was by far the best in transmitting virtue to others.² He made quite a point of the fact that even the virtuous Spartans were in some sense his pupils, though they could not

give him the usual fee since foreign education was taboo.³ Protagoras hints at the point of stress in Hippias' teaching when he insinuates that Hippias erred in requiring of his pupils that they learn arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, and music.⁴ Like a good Sophist, Hippias was careful that his charges learn to use this knowledge to the best advantage, so he did not fail to see them versed in dialectics and rhetoric. We even find him inviting the redoubtable Socrates to become his disciple in order that he might learn irrefutable answers to all questions.⁵

Hippias' pupils were also taught the social graces, and he boasted that, he, the most polite of men, could best teach good manners.⁶ As was to be expected of a Sophist, Hippias was not prodigal with his knowledge. He had a high estimation of his worth as a teacher and his fees for professional service was proportionately high. He was proud to say that while other Sophists had made an amazing amount of money as teachers, he himself made more money than any other two Sophists together.⁷

Like his fellow Sophists, Hippias had a devoted coterie of disciples among whom he had a reputation for profound wisdom. He would expound to them on a surprising diversity of topics.⁸ His fame overspread the bounds of his immediate circle of admirers and carried in its wake the noisy devotion of "hoi polloe".⁹ The cautious Spartans bowed to his wisdom as to a master; no doubt he owed his conquest of these more stolid Greeks to his indubitably nimble wit.¹⁰ The honor which he won from those

outside his own city was no greater than that which his fellow citizens rendered to him. Plato himself has Hippias tell us that whenever Elis had any business to transact with any of the states, she always came to Hippias first of all her citizens and chose him as envoy, believing him the ablest judge in political affairs. He took great pride in the fact that the difficult missions to the suspicious Spartans were consistently entrusted to him.¹¹ If there was any one thing which more than anything else would account for Hippias' well-nigh universal fame, it was his reputation for wide learning.

When we consider the range of Hippias' knowledge as presented to us by Plato, it is little wonder that among some of the moderns, "Hippias is celebrated as the representative of integral education, universality of culture, manual training, and I know not what else".¹² He was expert in geometry,¹³ most wise in calculating;¹⁴ he probed the processes of thought,¹⁵ and knew the value of letters and syllables and rhythms and harmonies.¹⁶ Great as was his knowledge of these subjects, he excelled in the science of astronomy;¹⁷ in this field he was without a peer. In addition to being a scientist he was a poet and a critic of the poets. In the Protagoras he commends Socrates' exposition of a poem of Simonides and volunteers to give a ready-made, elegant discourse on the same subject. In the Lesser Hippias he is mentioned giving a grandiloquent lecture on the Illiad and Odyssey, even responding accurately

to Socrates' questions about details of the poems.¹⁸ In order to have a subject of interest to the Spartans, he learned by heart and practiced thoroughly the genealogies of men and heroes and the foundations of cities and about antiquity in general.¹⁹ He had more than a practical man's knowledge of politics, for his intellect compassed both private and public affairs.²⁰

Even in one of such genius we are surprised to find a talent for making clothes; yet that is what we witness in the case of Hippias. We are told that once when he went to Olympia, everything he had on his person was his own work--his ring, his seal, a strigil and an oil-flask. He made his sandals and wove his cloak and tunic. His girdle, which was like the Persian girdles of the costliest kind, and which drew the admiration of all, was the work of his own hands.²¹

It is probably adding little to such a long list of achievements when we say that he had mastered the tricky rules of etiquette.²² His knowledge of all these subjects was the more easily grasped and retained due to his excellent memory. Once heard he could remember fifty names.²³ No wonder

that in the dialogues Hippias is called wise, learned, the wisest of men in the greatest number of arts, so famous for wisdom among all the Greeks.²⁴ He is even called a finished perfect man.²⁵ Can we wonder that such a man had a fearless confidence in his intellect; he tells Socrates, "Naturally, Socrates, I am in this state: for since I began to contend at the Olympic games, I have never yet met any one better than

myself in anything."²⁶ It is Hippias' overweening pride of intellect which seems to chafe Plato most.

Hippias' knowledge did not lie dormant, since he had at his command an instrument by which he could turn it to convenient use, that is, he was the master of a sophistic species of rhetoric and real oratory. In speaking of rhetoric Socrates mentions him in the same breath with Protagoras, Gorgias, and Prodicus; all of whom attained a certain eminence due to their brilliant manner of speaking. In the Protagoras Plato gives us a speech of Hippias in which he descants on the opposition of nature and law and is prodigal of synonyms and florid imagery. He speaks of an "overprecise, meticulous, mincing, and logic-chopping dialectic". He cautions Protagoras lest he "sail forth on the vast sea of eloquence with all canvas unfurled". In argumentation he insisted that he was anybody's match. He stands up rather poorly under Socrates' barrage of questions, but this is because Socrates is too insistent on accuracy of language and is too narrow-minded, seeking only that the real truth might appear. Hippias' idea of correct argumentation differed in manner and in purpose. He was satisfied if he was adroit and with the parry and quick with the "coup de grace". He proposed befogging the real issue and was content if his listeners were convinced of a falsehood undetected. When Socrates fears that his listeners will find fault with one of his arguments, Hippias is at hand to suggest, "Perhaps, Socrates,

these things might slip past the man unnoticed."²⁷ Hippias reveals his own mind in these words from the Greater Hippias: "But now, Socrates, what do you think all this questioning amounts to? It is mere scrapings and shavings of discourses, as I said a while ago, divided into bits; but that other ability is beautiful and of great worth, the ability to produce a discourse well and beautifully in a court of law or a council-house or before any other public body before which the discourse may be delivered, to convince the audience and to carry off, not the smallest, but the greatest prizes, the salvation of oneself, one's property, and one's friends. For these things, therefore, one must strive, renouncing these petty arguments, that one may not, by busying oneself, as at present, with mere talk and nonsense, appear to be a fool."²⁸ Here he shows wherein he differed from Plato; he sallied forth to verbal victories, Plato was constrained by the truth.²⁹

We glean another characteristic of our subject from the manner in which Hippias is lured into discussion with ill-disguised flattery. Hippias is revealed as an affected genius, an esthete in the sense that he was a pretender to fine taste and artistic culture.³⁰ During the discussion, Hippias remonstrates with Socrates, for his trained ears are shocked at Socrates' homely examples. "Quite right, my friend," says Socrates, "for it would not be appropriate for you to be filled up with such words, you who are so beautifully clad, so beautifully shod,

and so famous for wisdom among all the Greeks."³¹ The presence of others cramped the subtle workings of his mind. When he is at a loss for an answer to one of Socrates' questions he says, "Now I know that if I should go away into solitude and meditate alone by myself, I could tell it to you with the most perfect accuracy."³² Socrates responds with gibes he has been saving through many passages of the dialogue, "Ah, don't boast, Hippias!"

Plato's sketch of the Sophist from Elis has clear outlines. We see Hippias as a man of many talents for an amazing variety of tasks, both intellectual and manual. We understand why the Greeks considered him the best of the Greeks at the greatest number of arts, he was a scientist, artist, poet, craftsman, rhetorician, teacher, and man of affairs. His vanity was obnoxious, his search for truth was very limited in its scope. His manner, in spite of its being affected, won the admiration of "hoi polloi". Plato was bitterly disappointed that one of such talents should fritter them away. He expresses his sentiments in the last lines of the Lesser Hippias: "I go astray, up and down, and never hold the same opinion; and that I, or any ordinary man, go astray is not surprising; but if you wise men likewise go astray, that is a terrible thing for us also, if even when we have come to you we are not to cease from straying."³³

Notes to Chapter on Hippias

1. Cf. Shorey, What Plato Said, pp. 89, 470.
2. Cf. Protagoras, 357.E; Greater Hippias, 283.C, 284.A.
3. Greater Hippias, 284.C.
4. Protagoras, 318.E.
5. Greater Hippias, 287.A.
6. Lesser Hippias, 364.D.
7. Cf. Apology, 19.E; Greater Hippias, 281.B, 282.E.
8. Cf. Protagoras, 315.C; Lesser Hippias, 363.A.
9. Greater Hippias, 281.C; Lesser Hippias, 346.B.
10. Greater Hippias, 284.C.
11. Greater Hippias, 281.A.
12. Shorey, op. cit., p. 15.
13. Greater Hippias, 285.C; Lesser Hippias, 367.E.
14. Lesser Hippias, 366.D.
15. Greater Hippias, 285.C.
16. " " " .
17. Protagoras, 315.C; Greater Hippias, 285.C; Lesser Hippias,
368.A.
18. Protagoras, 347.A; Lesser Hippias, 364.E.
19. Greater Hippias, 285.D.
20. Greater Hippias, 281.B.
21. Lesser Hippias, 368.B.
22. Lesser Hippias, 364.D.
23. Greater Hippias, 285.D, E.

24. Cf. Protagoras, 314.C, 337.C; Greater Hippias, 281.A, 283.C, 286.E, 291.A; Lesser Hippias, 364.A, 368.B.
25. Greater Hippias, 281, B.
26. Lesser Hippias, 364.A.
27. Greater Hippias, 298.B.
28. Greater Hippias, 304.A, B.
29. For references to Hippias' rhetoric and dialectic cf. Phaedrus, 267.B; Protagoras, 337.C, 347.A, 348.E; Greater Hippias, 285.C, 286.A, 287.A, 288.A, 298.B, 300.C, 301.B, D, 304.A, B, C; Lesser Hippias, 363.A, C.
30. Cf. Greater Hippias, 288.D, 290.E, 291.A, 292.C, 295.A; Lesser Hippias, 364.D.
31. Greater Hippias, 291.A.
32. Greater Hippias, 295.A.
33. Lesser Hippias, 376.C.

Chapter VII.

Plato's Criticism of Sophistry as a Quasi-Philosophy.

This chapter is to serve as a supplement and a summary. It will serve as a supplement in so far as we shall consider what might be called the philosophy of the Sophists, using the word in the scientific sense. This will be in contrast to a summary of what we might term the Sophists' philosophy of life or philosophy of values. In the foregoing portion of this thesis we have avoided, as foreign to our purpose, any discussion of philosophy as such, admitting philosophical considerations only in so far as they were illustrative of character. Consequently, in order to round off our consideration of the Sophists as Plato saw them, we should mention the few things he has to say of the Sophists philosophy. We shall find that we have already considered the Sophists' philosophy of life when we studied Plato's pen sketches of Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, and Hippias. It will serve a useful purpose if we gather from these sketches what appears to be common to that quasi-philosophy, Sophistry.

The fundamental weakness of the Sophists' philosophy was in their epistemology. It is epitomized in Protagoras' dictum that "Man is the measure of all things."¹ This destroys the notion of an objective and universal truth. All truth is made subjective and relative--hence scepticism. Protagoras supported this view with a superficial psychological observation,

namely, that the same thing makes an entirely different impression on different persons. He also appealed to the faulty but convenient metaphysics of Heraclitus, "all things are in flux." From what we learn of the Sophists from the Platonic dialogues we must say that the Sophists did not carry out their doctrines to their logical conclusions. They are the mouth-pieces, not the corrupters of public opinion. Still, we do find them saying that virtue is power, or in other words, their system of ethics approached dangerously close to that relativity to which their premises should have led them.² Protagoras expresses a materialistic, almost atheistic, attitude, which is hinted at in other places, when he says, "I exclude the question of the gods, their existence or non-existence, from all discussion, oral or written."³ Finally, in a passage of the Protagoras, Plato seems to attribute hedonism to the Sophists.⁴ Protagoras does not wish openly to avow this doctrine, but neither he nor his fellow Sophists seem anxious to refute it; quite the contrary.

Plato himself has seen fit to summarize his opinions about the Sophists and their art. Of the Sophist he says, "First, he is a paid hunter after the young and wealthy. Secondly, a kind of merchant in articles of knowledge for the soul. Thirdly, a seller of his own productions of knowledge. Fifthly, an athlete in contests of words, who makes for his own art the art of disputation. Sixthly, a purger of souls, who removes opinions

that obstruct learning."⁵ He describes the art of such a man as "The imitative kind of the dissembling part of the art of contradiction, and belongs to the fantastic class of image-making art, and is not divine, but human, and has been defined in arguments as the juggling part of productive activity--he who says that the true Sophist is of this descent and blood will in my opinion speak the exact truth."⁶ Upon examination, this appears to be fairly accurate summary of what Plato said to us about the Sophists and the manner of life which they professed and taught.

Plato accuses the Sophists of exploiting that which he loved most, philosophy. Whence he calls the Sophists, "hireling huntsmen of rich young men". He says that the Sophists, many of whom were foreigners in Athenian eyes, imported spiritual wares and peddled the same. For them, certainly, knowledge was not its own end. Then of those things for which they could claim some originality, like Hippias, they were peddlers, not generous expositors; they made debate an end in itself, approaching it as a game, not an art, whence they are called, "athletes of eristic debate." When they are called "purgers of souls" they are not to be mistaken for true philosophers whom they resemble as the wolf resembles the dog. In all these criticisms Plato does not seem to be absolutely objective. We see the man Plato passing stricture as a person not as an objective philosopher. When, however, he accuses the Sophists of being jugglers of opinions he seems to speak of what he was convinced

was objectively the poison of Sophistry, all personal venom put aside. His chief criticism of Sophistry is that according to it "probabilities are more to be esteemed than truths, and it makes small things great and great things small by the power of words."⁷ Truth in Sophist hands becomes prostitute. For Plato, as we know him through his dialogues, truth was his goddess. And he has an added grief. The Sophists were not content with abusing truth themselves. They juggled the opinions they held in such wise that they won the minds of the Athenians, young and old, and fashioned an image so seductive that it lured the Athenians from their true goddess to whom Plato meant to draw them. That was the sin of Sophistry, it professed to give man virtue; it actually made man satisfied with a welter of opinions and the shallow mask of rhetoric. "Men come to you Sophists", says Socrates, "for guidance; but if you, wise though you be, go astray, that is a terrible thing, if even when they have come to you they are not to cease from their straying."⁸

Notes to Chapter VII.

1. Theaetetus, 152.A ff.
2. Meno, 73.C.
3. Theaetetus, 162.E.
4. Protagoras, 361.A, B; cf. Shorey, op. cit., p. 131.
5. Sophist, 231.D.
6. Sophist, 268.D.
7. Phaedrus, 267.A.
8. Lesser Hippias, 367.C.

APPENDIX

A consideration of this thesis raises a concomitant question. Granted that we now know what Plato said about the Sophist, in how far is Plato's picture accurate? Does Plato represent the Sophists as they actually were, or does he exaggerate his picture out of all proportion? In other words, in how far does Plato's subjective view of the Sophists coincide with objective reality?

A decisive answer to this question might well be the work of another thesis. It was only natural, however, that in the course of our study of Plato's dialogues, we should come to our own opinion as to the objective validity of Plato's representation of the Sophists and Sophistry. To round off the work of this thesis, we will give our reasoned opinion here.

For many reasons, it seems to us that the Platonic idea of the Sophists which we have presented in the preceding chapters is objectively valid. In the first place, Plato was speaking about that which he knew. The Sophists were Plato's contemporaries; Plato read the writings of the Sophists. When we are determining the truth of a thing which we know from human testimony, the first thing we do is to attempt to find an immediate witness of the fact. Plato was an immediate witness of Sophistry. On the face of it, then, Plato's testimony bears more weight than that of witnesses of our times, such as Gomperz and Grote--especially when we remember that

most of our first-hand knowledge of the Sophists comes from Plato.

Furthermore, Plato was a competent witness. He was indisputably qualified from an intellectual point of view. The philosophical writings of Plato render this point beyond cavil. What is oftentimes lost sight of is the fact that Plato was temperamentally and emotionally better fitted than his modern critics. Why? Because Plato was a fifth-century Greek. As such, he was capable of a keen appreciation of the temper of the Sophists' philosophy, and of its effect on a people with whom he was one in environment, upbringing, and sympathies. Classical scholars tell us that if we are to understand anything Greek, we must see it through Greek eyes. We are often told to orientate ourselves. As a consequence we must see that Plato is a more than acceptable witness of Sophistry, since he was a Greek putting Greeks to the scrutiny.

Finally, Plato was an honest witness. His honesty seems established, firstly, because of the quality of the man we glean from his writings; secondly, because of the silence of other Greeks who would certainly have sprung to the defence of the Sophists had Plato not painted them true, at least in general contour; and, thirdly, because Plato had nothing to gain by not being honest. Some might impugn this last argument. They might say that Plato used the Sophists, and in such wise as to extol his master, Socrates. To us also it appears

that Plato does exaggerate his picture in the Sophist and in the Hippias dialogues. Nevertheless, it seems clear to us, because of all the arguments we have brought forward, that, although Plato may be guilty of some exaggeration, his portrait of the Sophists is fundamentally correct and honest.

In conclusion, let it be said that the pen-pictures we have presented in the preceding chapters, drawn as they were from the dialogues of Plato, serve primarily to reveal to us another facet of the Platonic mind. Furthermore, because of the reasonings we have advanced in this appendix, they appear to serve as well to give us a fundamentally sound and objectively real view of the Sophists.

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